An Open Letter to Arthur Schlesinger

By Bill Moyers

Dear Arthur:

I regret that you missed the message of "The CIA's Secret Army." John and Robert Kennedy were not the "villains" of this CBS Reports and the CIA was not, as you incorrectly charge, exculpated. The documentary, as Haynes Johnson of the Washington Post said in a part of his review which you failed to quote, raised questions about the major issues of our times, war and peace, assassinations and anti-communism, secrecy vs. democratic traditions, and abuses of power." Mr. Johnson had some criticisms of the broadcast, which you took out of context, but he concluded that "by unmasking the secret and ugly side of our government's actions, and making us now face these consequences, the program performs a notable public service."

The "villain," to use again that word which did not appear in the broadcast, but which you seized upon from a single review, was a mindset — sometimes shared by people like you and me — which infused an entire era of American history with a passion that led men at the highest levels of government to do the worst of things for what they thought to be the best of reasons, from the secret war against Cuba to Vietnam and Watergate.

TO PUT THE SECRET war against Cuba into perspective, we traced that mindset from 1954 forward. Your attack on the broadcast compels me, at risk of friendship, to point out how even a "fair-minded" historian, as you describe yourself, succumbed to it. These are your own words, from a once classified memorandum you wrote to President Kennedy in April, 1961, offering your advice to the President just after he had authorized the Bay of Pigs invasion, then the largest CIA operation in history:

"If Castro (wins the engagement) and flies a group of captured Cubans to New York to testify that they were organized and trained by CIA, we will have to be prepared to show that the alleged CIA personnel were errant idealists or soldiers-of-fortune working on their own."

Under the heading PROTECTION OF THE PRESIDENT you gave this additional advice:

"The character and repute of President Kennedy constitutes one of our greatest national resources. Nothing should be done to jeopardize this invaluable asset. When lies must be told, they should be told by subordinate officials. At no point should the President be asked to lend himself to the cover operation. For this reason, there seems to me merit in Secretary Rusk's suggestion that someone other than the President make the final decision and do so in his absence — someone whose head can later be placed on the block if things go terribly wrong."

President Kennedy ignored your counsel and publicly accepted responsibility for the Bay of Pigs. But your memo, written in those very different times, reveals the attitudes and approach that finally did prevail in the secret war against Cuba which our documentary set out to report. You now admit that the secret war after the Bay of Pigs was a "blot on the Kennedy administration and eminently worth exposure," but in the 1,031 pages of your account of the Kennedy years one searches in vain for anything about it. I can understand that you would prefer to pass over the part of the secret war which occurred during the thousand days, to pretend it never happened — even as some of us who came later wish we could now walk away the Vietnam war and be remembered only as yearners for a great society. This I understand. But you can hardly be surprised that in preparing this broadcast or judging your

Bill Moyers, former press secretary to President Johnson, replies here to Arthur Schlesinger's criticism (Calendar, July 10) of his "The CIA's Secret Army," a CBS Reports documentary.

rebuttal, my colleagues and I did not consider you an unemotional historian of the era.

CONSIDER, FOR EXAMPLE, the theory of the circumlocutious approach to briefing Presidents. You criticize us for accepting the word of Richard Bissell, the chief of covert operations, who told us that "a good intelligence officer conducts his conversations with the Chief of State in such a way that the Chief of State can never be proved to have explicitly authorized certain kinds of actions." But Mr. Bissell is the only surviving CIA policy maker with first-hand knowledge of the agency's Mafia plot against Castro, and furthermore, he is a man of no meager credibility. You thought so, too, Arthur, when you wrote your account of the Kennedy years, calling Mr. Bissell "a man of high character and remarkable intellectual gifts," possessed, you said, of a "swift and penetrating mind" and "an unsurpassed talent for lucid analysis and fluent exposition." I do not find it easy to dismiss such a man today even though you and I may find his testimony discomfiting.

That is only one example of how your deep personal attachment to the official view of reality in those years distorted your response to "The CIA's Secret Army." Your rebuttal is full of too many holes for me to respond adequately in this space. I can deal here with two or three of your major errors and will be happy to meet personally, if you desire, to go over the many others.

THE KENNEDY YEARS constituted only a part of a broadcast which covered an 18-year period during which either CIA or CIA-trained Cuban agents, or both, waged covert warfare against Cuba from bases in the United States. Much of our report was based on original research, but for the treatment of that section you protest — the Kennedy years — we relied primarily on the lengthy report by the Senate Intelligence Committee. While your own book is silent on the matter, the Senate committee reveals that President Kennedy not only authorized Operation Mongoose, the CIA's post-Bay of Pigs war on Cuba, but that he appointed his brother, the Attorney General, to supervise it. The overthrow of Fidel Castro, in Robert Kennedy's own words, had "the top priority in the United States Government."

We did not, however, portray the Kennedys as (in your words) "instigators of assassination." On the contrary, we stated that, "The CIA began to plot Castro's assassination during the Eisenhower administration," when the agency "undertook its most highly criticized operation — the Mafia contract to assassinate Castro." CIA attempts to kill Castro did continue through the Kennedy years, and you're unhappy with us because you think that we should have stated "that not a scintilla of hard evidence has ever emerged to show that Kennedy, or Eisenhower for that matter, authorized or even knew about the CIA murder plots."

Again, you missed the point.

WE WENT TO GREAT lengths to explain why it is so difficult to discover what any President knew about the CIA's assassination plotting. As Richard Bissell (and others who testified to the Senate committee) described it, the agency's method of briefing Presidents was designed to allow the White House to "plausibly deny" knowledge of these matters. It was a system designed, as indeed was your own advice to the President, for non-accountability. As the Senate committee report says (page 314): "The prevailing practice on all sensitive matters was to brief the President without obtaining his express approval. Maxwell Taylor testified that the President would simply listen to what the person briefing him had to say without responding affirmatively so that 'the record did not say that the President personally approved (the project).' "

You would have us believe that the White House was completely kept in the dark about the CIA's assassination plotting. But the Senate report reveals that the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs was briefed about the creation of Executive Action, the CIA's permanent assassination capability, in early 1961. The agency was told neither to stop nor continue its assassination planning, and the importance of that ambiguity was the point we stressed. We did not, by innuendo, try to tag any President with accountability for the assassination plots per se. Rather, we showed — conclusively, I think — that the subject was handled in such a way as to leave the CIA with the impression that assassination was a permissible tactic to employ. The secret war against Cuba which was commissioned after the Bay of Pigs further added to the climate in which, without explicit approval, the CIA felt it was permissible to continue its plotting, in order to carry out the President's directive to remove Castro from power. You say that the CIA was a rogue elephant out of control. I question this. I know that in addition to many fine officers, the CIA contains zealots who believe that extremism in the pursuit of anti-communism is no vice. "The CIA's Secret Army" exposed many of those zealots, in a thorough and uncompromising investigation.

WE DID NOT, HOWEVER, stop there, and this is what offended your protectionist view of history. We went on to say that the CIA drew its sustenance from the larger society around it, all the way back to that secret report in 1954 of "wise men," led by Herbert Hoover, whose recommendations for the future use of the CIA urged that "long-standing American concepts of 'fair play' be reconsidered" and that Americans "learn to subvert, sabotage and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated and more effective methods than those used against us." I believe that on the whole the CIA, from the assassination plots to Operation Phoenix, thought it was acting within the mores of that prevailing consensus in the high councils of government.

I believe I understand the emotions you brought to the experience of watching "The CIA's Secret Army;" I experienced some of them while working on the report. I was not as close to either Kennedy as you, although I admired them each immensely and continue to cherish my memories of them. I see them, however, not as men frozen in their time but as men who were learning from their experiences, always growing and changing.

The last time I saw Robert Kennedy, over dinner at the Caravelle in New York, we talked about how both of us had come late to our perceptions of Vietnam. "When I arrived in Washington," I said, "I had far more energy than wisdom." He replied, "Same here. I have myself wondered at times if we did not pay a very great price for being more energetic than wise about a lot of things, especially Cuba."

"The CIA's Secret Army" was not the story of rogue elephants or of immoral men masquerading as heroes. It was a melancholy account of a time in our lives when we began to forget what makes this nation unique in the world. It was one more example of how vulnerable is this experiment called democracy, even to good men when secrecy cloaks their passions and policies. There is no pleasure, as a journalist, in following a story that brings one into conflict with old friends or with his own past, but there is no shame in admitting that the stories you and I lived were almost always more than we knew, or wanted to be known; that the main characters who touched our lives were more human than we thought. One looks back not to moralize or condemn but to consider the deepest issues of accountability and responsibility and to ask, "What went wrong?" To learn these lessons, as Macaulay said, "I shall cheerfully bear the reproach of having descended below the dignity of history."

Warmly,

Bill

President John F. Kennedy and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy in 1963.